

# *Holiday Stress and Deployment*

## **Overview**

Avoiding holiday stress when your loved one is deployed.

- Plan ahead for the holidays
- Surround yourself with people
- Reduce holiday stress
- Be realistic about what to expect

The winter holidays can be stressful for anyone, but when your loved one is deployed, they can be especially difficult. You may experience a range of emotions, from concern to loneliness -- even anger and disappointment.

The holidays may magnify those feelings, but they can also be a time to strengthen your emotional commitment to your service member and your family.

## **Plan ahead for the holidays**

If possible, sit down with your deployed service member before your separation to talk about how you will mark the holidays. If you are already apart, discuss your plans through letters, e-mail, or telephone calls.

- *Get an early start with gifts and cards.* Depending on where your loved one is stationed, it can take a week or more for a package to arrive from the U.S. Give yourself plenty of time to make or purchase and send your gift so your service member will receive it in time for the holiday. If you have children, ask them to write their gift lists early to avoid last-minute purchases that may put you over your budget.
- *Record a holiday message.* Borrow a video camera or tape recorder if you don't have one, and record yourself and other family members wishing the service member a happy holiday season. Do this far enough in advance so your loved one receives it in time for the holiday. Be sure to include a "Do not open until . . ." note on the package instructing your service member to wait until the day of the holiday to view or listen to the recording.
- *Be flexible with phone calls.* Calls home are unpredictable, so it's best not to count on a phone call from your service member on the holiday itself. You might want to aim for a call during the week of the holiday instead. If you have a cell phone, arrange for the deployed service member to call that number so you won't miss the phone call if you're away from home. Just be sure to have your cell phone with you (and turned on) at all times.

## **Surround yourself with people**

Look for opportunities to be with family and friends. Get together with others who are in your situation. Being with others who are going through the same thing helps prevent loneliness.

- *Plan to attend holiday events for families of deployed service members.* You can find out about these by checking with your base's family support center.

- *If you have school-age children, attend holiday school events.* Volunteer to help your children's teachers. Even if you aren't able to attend the event, you can bake or help make decorations.
- *Help organize a holiday party or potluck for families in your loved one's command.* This will help keep your mind off your loneliness and you will be comforted to be with others who are going through the same thing.
- *Visit friends or family on the holiday.* If you live far away and funds are tight, ask those who would normally give you a gift to chip in for an airline ticket instead. If you prefer to stay home, invite family or friends to spend the holiday with you.
- *Volunteer for a good cause.* Collect coats for the needy; help stock shelves at the food pantry; serve a meal at a homeless shelter. Helping others less fortunate than you will keep you busy and will remind you of all you have. Ask your family support center staff about volunteer opportunities in your area.

### **Reduce holiday stress**

It's easy to get caught up in all you have to do during this time of year, especially if you have always shared the work with your deployed service member. Tell yourself you don't have to do everything. It's more important to take time out to enjoy the season.

- *Find ways to have fun.* Drive or walk with your family or friends to see the holiday decorations. Give yourself time for activities that make you feel good. Go swimming, sledding, ice skating, or skiing. Go on a nature walk or start a new project.
- *Get plenty of rest and exercise.* Remember to take care of yourself and keep your energy level high by eating well, staying active, and getting enough sleep.
- *Prioritize.* Make a list of all the things you need to do and decide which ones are the most important. Do those first. Then if you have time, start on the others. You may not have time for everything on the list, but if you get the important things out of the way, the rest probably won't matter.

### **Be realistic about what to expect**

As the family member of a deployed service member, it's important to be flexible, especially during the holidays. Here are some ways to do that:

- *Accept that this holiday season will be different.* It's easy to fall into the trap of expecting everything to be perfect, especially around the holidays.
- *Do something you wouldn't ordinarily do.* Instead of celebrating the holiday the way you have in years past, make an effort to keep busy in a memorable way. If you have always stayed home on the holiday, this year go to the movies, spend time with friends or relatives, or visit a museum that's open on the holiday.

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- *Keep holiday decorations up until your loved one returns, if it makes you feel better.* Or take them down and put them back up when your loved one returns. Some families celebrate the holidays twice: once on the actual dates, and again when their deployed service member returns home. However, be aware that leaving decorations up long after the holiday has passed may be an unpleasant reminder of your separation and may make it more difficult to accept your situation.
- *Prepare yourself for a post-holiday letdown.* Getting through the holidays may not be as difficult as you thought, especially if you keep busy and surround yourself with loved ones. Once it's over and things go back to normal, you may find it difficult to get on with day-to-day life. Prepare yourself for this possibility by keeping your support system in place in January and beyond.

This article was written with the help of Mary Craig, Marine Corps Family Team Building Program Section Head; Ed Roscoe, Program Analyst for Family Readiness Programs for Commander Navy Installations Command; Bernice Schrobo, Fleet and Family Support Program Analyst for Commander Navy Installations Command; and Navy Chaplain Steven P. Unger, LCDR, CHC, Religious Ministries Branch, Marine Corps Combat Development Command.

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